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ABSTRACT

To clarify issues in the controversy in Sweden concerning the means and ends of family policy, this article analyzes the economic plight of Swedish families with children, elucidates the views of parents and politicians, discusses the changing role and status of women, and considers prospects for the future. Also discussed are work equality and sex discrimination, the low birth rate, government obligation, child care services, tax effects, general versus selective assistance, and the division of governmental responsibility. Concluding remarks focus on an overall view of ends and means, freedom of choice, and inefficiency in the redistribution of wealth through taxes and benefits. (RH)

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THE SWEDISH FAMILY: PROBLEMS, PROGRAMS AND PROSPECTS

BY PAUL LINDBLOM

Behind the image of the Swedish welfare society lurks great controversy concerning the ends and means of family policy. Why has the family's standard of living decreased? What should and can be done? This article gets to the heart of the matter by analyzing the economic plight of families with children, elucidating the views of parents and politicians, discussing the changing role and status of women, and considering future prospects.

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The author alone is responsible for the opinions expressed in this article.

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There is a perception of Swedish social policy, common in other countries, and often referred to in Swedish debates. It pictures a society where most of the people and all of the political parties generally agree on the goals for and the extent of the so-called social welfare policy. The great conflicts are thought to be in other areas: economic, educational and environmental policies.

It is, however, debatable if this unity ever existed. In any case, it is clear today that values and opinions are very divided concerning social policy. It is a sector where the prospects for cooperation are small and where heated confrontation has become increasingly common between organizations representing employers and employees.

Family Policy and Child Care

Family policy and child care represent one area where these conflicts clearly appear. It is not possible to simply and schematically describe these conflicts. The problems are very complicated in the sense that there are a large number of measures which, by themselves, are possible to use to affect conditions - including insurance, grants, and support for child care institutions. But, also the view of women's occupations is part of the discussion and tax issues cannot be avoided. It is not easy either to fairly clearly formulate policy goals in this area and still more complicated to apportion responsibility between parents and government, both national and local.

The ideal family policy (including child care) is assumed to consist of a combination of government programs which will favor families and not be too much of an economic burden on society. One difficulty is that one is quite bound by today's laws and regulations. One cannot begin from the beginning. Possible reforms must be realized by considering what is possible to change given current conditions without completely destabilizing the system. When we get around to a concrete discussion concerning policy implementation, there are great differences of opinion.

Political Party Opinions

Currently, the largest opposition party in Parliament, the Moderate Party, differs considerably from the governing Social Democratic Party.* This polarization has become increasingly evident. Based on a left-to-right scale, the three remaining parties are placed in the following way. The Center Party and the Liberal Party are "middle parties" with a clear middle-class profile and the Left Party Communists lie to the left of the Social Democrats.

On one point only, there is a certain agreement between all five parties: economic conditions have worsened in recent years for families with children. They have a strikingly lower standard than other households (i.e. families without children and single persons) as elucidated by comprehensive statistical data. Among other things, it is evident that the worsened standard of living is quite well correlated with the number of children. In any case, for the time being, there is a low birthrate in Sweden partially due to economic conditions (see below).

On the other hand, there is no common view as to why development has gone in this direction. During more than four decades, Sweden was governed by the Social Democrats. It was succeeded in 1976 by a non-socialist government. Different non-socialist governments ruled until 1982 when the Social Democrats regained power. During the debate before the September 1985 general election, family policy and child care was one of the strikingly controversial issues. The Social Democrats remained in power after the election. Even after the election, family policy remains one of the major domestic political issues. The sharp polarization between the Social Democrats (partially with Communist support) and the non-socialist parties remains. Simultaneously, among the non-socialist parties, one can also note many different views regarding future policy.

The Status of Women

Something which also must be discussed in this context is to what extent changes in the social structure justify family policy reforms. Above all, these changes concern the status of women. These changes are dependent on profound and difficult to grasp processes within working life, values which concern different ways of life and moral issues, and direct political decisions. Social researchers do not agree amongst themselves on future development. Even if we limit ourselves to the typical industrial countries, it is difficult to predict how future society will look. Talk about a post-industrial society is rather unclear. Nevertheless, it appears likely that actual industry will employ considerably fewer people than today while the development of the service sector outside of industry is more difficult to predict.

There are several views today concerning women's occupations. One extreme assumes that the homemaker will completely disappear and that that is desirable. Another view represents those who believe that the future will bring not only high employment levels for women but, fortunately, freedom of choice for women (or more radically for one of the parents) to stay home for some years devoting themselves to child care and housework.

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* After the 1985 election, Parliament had the following composition: Moderate Party 76 seats, Center Party 44, Liberal Party 51, Social Democratic Party 159 and the Left Party Communists 19. The socialist bloc has 178 of a total of 349 seats against 171 for the non-socialist bloc.

The choice of viewpoint is of great significance for the development of family and child care policy. This can sound a bit theoretical because, up to now, the labor market structure, access to day care centers, recreation centers and family day care centers as well as the attitude among family members toward sharing housework "fairly", etc., has had great impact on the scope of women's occupations. Women who want to advance in their occupations and compete for promotions do not willingly choose part-time work. However, when institutional obstacles prevent both spouses from working full time, or even part time, it is still the woman who, in most cases, gives up working for extended periods.

Women's Work Roles: A Flashback

However, it is desirable that the discussion concerning the economic and institutional problems within family policy does not take place in an ideological vacuum, but that ideas and values concerning individual status in the future society are the basis for practical programs. There are such ideas in the Swedish debate, but formulations are often difficult to grasp, too general and, therefore, possible to interpret in different ways.

Accordingly, women's occupations have great importance for determining family policy requirements. A short historic flashback is of interest. Official statistics show few employed women in the old rural societies. But, this is a misleading picture. Wives and daughters of farm workers as well as other women are not counted. These women made great contributions and would today be considered as employed.

When thoroughgoing farming efficiencies were put into effect after World War I, many women moved from the countryside to the industrial districts. In many cases, they found work not only in traditional women's occupations but also within industry. In 1930, women comprised 27% of all gainfully employed. Among all women in the working age population, 8% of the married women and 56.8% of the unmarried women were gainfully employed.

A long period of stagnation began with the Great Depression at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. In 1960, women made up 29% of the entire labor force, hence an insignificant increase compared with 1930.

During this period, the marriage rate rose quickly while the birth rate decreased dramatically. After 1960, a striking change took place. In twenty years the number of employed persons increased by one million with women constituting nearly the entire increase. In 1985, women constituted 47% of the labor force, a higher figure than in any other industrialized country. Particularly striking is the number of gainfully employed married women. They represent 70% of all married women of working age (16-64 years old). A great number of working women have pre-school children (under age 7).

This great increase has primarily taken place within the public sector. Women work in the fields of health care, social work and education, i.e. for the county councils and municipalities. Women also work for the central government, primarily for the Post Office Administration and the Telecommunications Administration.

Future Prospects for Women

Looking into the future, one sees quite an unclear, problematic picture for women. Each year, about 60,000 women are expected to enter the labor force, while approximately 20,000 older women will retire.

For economic reasons, it is considered unlikely today that the public sector can expand to any greater extent. Nevertheless, this is a very controversial issue given the many views among economists and politicians.

In the long run, there is no doubt that industry will be able to efficiently increase its production with fewer employees. On the other hand, there are many needs within the service sector which are not met. Many of these needs are found within the public sector such as care of different kinds, social work, education, and culture. Continued development within these areas would favor the women in the labor force. We expect, then, that it will take a long time before women, to a much greater extent, educate themselves for and concentrate on getting male-dominated jobs.

If there is belt tightening or stagnation within the public sector, then many women will have difficulty obtaining work. In this context, it's worth noting that a great number of women employed within the public sector are working part time. Therefore, a reduction in working hours would not bring about any radical improvements for women in the labor force.

Work Equality and Sex Discrimination

A law concerning equality between women and men at work went into effect in 1980. The purpose of the law is to promote equal work rights for men and women. The law concerns all types of work comprising employers, employees and prospective employees. The law contains a ban on sex discrimination concerning hiring, promotion, job requirements, management and suspension as well as a requirement that employers actively promote equality at work. The employer is required to accomodate working conditions for both men and women. Given a skewed sex distribution, the employer is required to make a special effort to obtain job applications from the least represented sex.

There are many psychological barriers preventing the desired equality. It is easy to note that there are distinct differences between the generations. It is one thing to call for equality in principle and quite another to draw the consequences. If each spouse is to make an equal effort towards his/her education and occupation, then each will have to equally share in the care and stimulation of the children as well as the housework. Younger couples, both married and unmarried, are discussing this problem at a point in time when views are not hardened and when the man does not negatively view devoting as much time to the children as the woman.

Low Birth Rate

In spite of this, the birth rate in Sweden is low in the 1980s. On the average, the number of children born alive each year between 1946 and 1950 was nearly 125,000. Since then, the birth rate decreased with the exception of a certain increase during the 1960s, but no more than 98,480 children were born in 1985. Statistical data for 1986 show a certain increase.

There are investigations which more closely shed light on this development. Statistics Sweden interviewed 5,000 randomly chosen women aged 20-24 in 1981. Here is a summary of the results. Women study further than previously and are gainfully employed to a greater extent. Cohabitation outside marriage is common and more unstable than marriage. Birth control is more effective. There is a favorable attitude toward family planning by most women.

Given the thought of study and the need for a firm foot in the labor force, women choose to wait to have children. Having more than two children is considered both too costly and too much of an occupational barrier.

Total population has not diminished, however, due to increasing length of life and immigration. The nature of the debate carried on by patriotic Swedes during the 1930s does not exist today. Generally, one sees development individualistically. Each family chooses how many children it wants. Abortion legislation also has significance here. According to current law, every woman has the right to get an abortion before the end of the twelfth week of pregnancy. Between the twelfth and eighteenth week of pregnancy, a woman also has the right to have an abortion after an investigation concerning the woman's personal circumstances. Still later, abortion is allowed only for "special reasons", i.e. if the woman's life is in danger. There were 31,000 legal abortions in 1985 which can be seen as a result of family choice concerning children.

Government Obligation

In the political parties' more general statements concerning family policy, there are, naturally, favorable words about the joy children bring. However, it is emphasized that it is the government's obligation to take part of the responsibility for ensuring a good situation for families with children. Family choice is not questioned although one does not have the same optimistic view as the 1940 population commission. It stated that most people want to have more children and that if only the government would establish the programs needed to equalize the costs of bringing up children Sweden would be prevented from becoming a country with too few children.

Probably, no one would make such a prognosis today. Many may not want to plan their future with children due to the risks of a major war resulting in catastrophic effects. But, it is just as likely that economic conditions, which disfavor families with children and, in many cases, do not give them a reasonable standard of living, mean more. A difficult to judge factor is also that many younger and middle-aged people have another view of marriage (and cohabitation) than was common in earlier generations. They do not count on a life-long marriage to the same extent as others. Therefore, it is not so strange that they do not want to bind themselves to the responsibility of having to provide for children for too long a period.

When women give priority to a longer education than previously and want to gain a firm footing in the labor force before they have children, it naturally follows that the number of children decreases. This is, in any case, something evident, and perhaps sufficiently explains the population development during recent years.

A large family, even one with relatively high salaries where both spouses work, reaches a stage in life where children's expenses can limit its affluence to quite a large extent, particularly if several children are teen-agers. However, high income earners may somewhat equalize their expenses between different periods. A person with a low income lacks this opportunity. There are no general methods to completely equalize expenses during a life cycle. On the other hand, certain government assistance for families works in that direction. One should plan family policy both in terms of the life cycle and short-term needs.

Child Care Services

Child care services have great importance for the family budget. Therefore, sooner or later, these resources will be the focus of discussion concerning family policy.

A family which utilizes municipal child care has a considerably higher standard of living than those families who do not have access to this form of child care. In quite a broad range of income levels, families with two or more children live near the subsistence level when municipal child care is not available.

White collar groups and the highly educated have, relatively speaking, more children enrolled in municipal child care. Parents belonging to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation often arrange child care by curtailing their working hours or by leaving their children in the care of a parent staying home all day.

Opinions are divided concerning the future extension of child care. Parliamentarians from the Moderate and Center parties argue that it is neither economically feasible nor desirable to extend the scope of child care to reach everyone. Many parents want to take care of their own children. When both parents cannot find gainful employment, they have no need for municipal day care. The Social Democrats and the Left Party Communists, on the other hand, have emphasized that they want as quick an expansion as possible. Based on investigation results, the Liberal Party believes that continued expansion is necessary. Liberals think that private initiative should be encouraged through parental co-operatives, day care centers directed by organizations, etc., to bring about comparable alternatives.

One other factor should be mentioned. The parents' attitudes toward day care centers, recreation centers, and family day care centers reflect how society has changed and how more people today accept the interplay between parental and institutional contributions.

Tax Effects

Naturally, tax effects on the family budget are always discussed. The Swedish tax system is directed towards individuals resulting in consequences which may disfavor the family. Since the national income tax is progressive, it is more advantageous if both parents earn just as much together as one parent in another family where the second parent has no income. The latter case affects many large families.

Accordingly, the tax is determined without considering the burden of providing for a family. The government's redistribution of income, primarily children's allowances and housing subsidies as well as the tax reductions, which take into consideration household composition and the maintenance burden, concern relatively small sums.

It is not possible to estimate a family's financial position only on the basis of income and capital. Tax-deductible capital deficits must also be taken into consideration. Generally, higher income earners have considerably greater tax deduction.

General vs. Selective Assistance

There is another issue currently debated. The main point of Swedish social policy lies in general financial assistance through social insurance, where the benefits up to a certain limit are related to loss of income, and on children's allowances granted to all families with children of certain ages. Distributional effects are reached through taxation.

But there is one large means-tested grant, the housing subsidy, which may have troubling marginal effects. It may be unfavorable for a family to increase its income if this leads to the diminishing or elimination of the housing subsidy. Marginal effects can also be obtained through fees for child care or through the scale of taxation. There are those who think that the marginal effects should be eliminated from the social policy system. But, according to others interpreting the statistical data of standard-of-living researchers, in reality, few families with children are adversely affected.

There are also those who criticize the present system's general assistance. They believe that the economic situation justifies returning to a relatively dominant role for individualized means testing. One Swedish researcher, Walter Korpi, has shown that one can develop two patterns for different types of social policy.

	Social political model	
Dimensions	Marginal	Institutional
Share of GNP for social fees	Small	Large
Share of the affected population	Small	Large
Importance of employment creation and other preventive measures	Little	Great
Dominating type of program	Selective	General
Goal level	Minimum standard	Normal standard
Predominant form of financing	Fees	Taxes
Tax progressivity	Little	Great
Importance of social control	Great	Little
Importance of private organizations	Great	Little

The Swedish social policy is constructed, to a large extent, according to the institutional model. In contrast, one can observe the U.S. where the Reagan Administration has strengthened the marginal model characteristics. But, the institutional model is not considered to be without problems in Sweden as shown by the rigorous debates in recent years concerning economic and social policies.

Division of Governmental Responsibility

The division of responsibility between the central government, county councils and municipalities also complicates the picture. Within social policy, the central government has the major responsibility for labor market policy, housing policy and social insurance. The county council's share of responsi-

bility has been concentrated on health care while municipal responsibility primarily concerns services (child welfare, treatment of alcoholics as well as care of children, the aged, and the handicapped).

Individual means-tested assistance remains but its scope has been widened. The Social Services Act is a goal-oriented enabling act which means, among other things, that each municipality has great freedom to act according to its particular situation. The method of assistance is determined in consultation with those affected.

When municipalities, in many cases, are economically squeezed, there may be risks that the construction of the general law results in certain municipalities becoming too restrictive. However, social welfare committee decisions can be appealed to the county court. In consultation with the municipalities, the National Board of Health and Welfare is responsible for general planning and keeping up with the application of government decisions concerning social welfare.

An Overall View: Ends and Means

Family policy debaters, now and then, search for an overall view. This is natural given the many programs which are the basis for family policy. But, it is difficult to create a structure of different programs forming a harmonic whole where definite goals can be distinguished. Family policy has grown successively during many years. From the beginning, many programs have had a more or less provisional character awaiting a unified policy.

Such an aggregate effort has, however, not been made for different reasons - possibly, above all, because there is strong resistance to reforms of this type both from administrative and psychological viewpoints. Therefore, it is also difficult to formulate fairly exactly those goals which are the basis for family policy if we do not satisfy ourselves with very general statements of the type "Families shall have good opportunities to provide their children with good care and good possibilities for development" or something similar.

The different views of family policy, which are expressed in bills introduced by the parliamentary parties as well as the programs of different interest groups, show essential differences concerning both ends and means.

Freedom of Choice

Freedom of choice is one prestigious concept in the debate. If we see freedom of choice from the viewpoints of the individual and the family, it is not difficult to agree on what it means. Freedom of choice must not be dependent on family income. If one of the parents wants to stay at home and does not want to be gainfully employed (in any case, not during a succession of years), then the family budget should not get in the way.

This type of family has not become more common. There is no great certainty, based on any material, to determine how much this depends on purely economic considerations and to what extent it depends on women's desires for gainful employment. The only thing that we can state with any certainty is that both these factors, in many cases, act together.

On the other hand, it is quite easy to show what limits freedom of choice. There are a great number of families who need two incomes. Freedom of choice

is also limited when child care is unavailable although both spouses want to be employed. Here, the effects can be very negative; during certain periods, a family can be obliged to apply for social welfare grants.

Circle Effect

Many of the different views concerning family policy go back to conflicts of a wider significance. The core of the present Swedish social policy lies in general programs such as social insurance and children's allowances. The system assumes transfers of considerable proportions to households. But all income earners contribute by paying taxes. The government also receives considerable income from employers' fees which affects the scope of salaries, etc.

We can view these grants in a longer time frame (e.g. pensions) or when something particular occurs such as sickness or unemployment. Thus, there is no direct link between a person's taxes and the grants he receives in different forms such as social insurance benefits and children's allowances. Those who criticize this social policy often speak about a system which causes a "circle effect"; the money goes up and back between the individual and the government. This is inevitable if we want to have redistributional effects such as those provided by social insurance and if we want to avoid a system of expensive administration (means-tested assistance). On the other hand, one can naturally discuss whether certain types of social benefits give rise to a "circle effect" which is unfavorable for the beneficiary. But then we get into the question of how the entire tax system works and that lies outside the scope of this article.

Translation: William Borden